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ABSTRACT

This handbook is designed to help parents understand, encourage, and help their gifted children. A brief overview includes discussions of the meaning of the term "gifted," the identification of gifted children, and the goals of gifted education. Parents are advised to assist their children with time management, decision making about time and activities, appropriate behavior, responsibility for routine tasks, task completion, and time for daydreaming. It is recommended that parents as role models should provide enough psychological freedom and safety to allow children to take chances and make mistakes. Assisting children in setting realistic goals is discussed as another function of parents as role models. The use of leisure time is discussed, including the examination and management of parents' leisure time activities as examples for children. Suggestions are given for creating a stimulating environment with trips, reading time, hobbies, supervised experiments, writing, and verbal expression. Praise for specific accomplishments is recommended to reinforce children's self-concept. Answering questions and providing time for questions also is presented as an important task for parents. (EM)

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PARENTING YOUR GIFTED CHILD

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Written by
Trevor T. Steinbach

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PARENTING THE GIFTED CHILD

"No baby is born stupid," states David Lewis in his book, How to be a Gifted Parent, yet the #1 question facing gifted children and their parents is keeping gifted students gifted.

For most parents it is the school that "discovers" that their child is gifted. To them their child is very normal. That is one of the dichotomies of giftedness--many are discovered by non-parents. The first problems which confront the parents are "What is gifted?" and "So what do I do now?" It is the goal of this booklet to assist parents in understanding some of the blessings and burdens of parenting gifted children.

Let's look at the first question facing the gifted parent. "What is gifted?" Well, besides being what your child is, it is potential ability realized. Your child, like all children, has abilities. Some children (about 5%) have more potential abilities and more actual abilities. These abilities are found in academic subjects, art, music, theatre, creativity, or leadership ability, according to the state of Illinois. These abilities are recognized through various tests, teacher recommendations, and checklists of gifted behavior. Your child may have always excelled in music or math or language arts, but what the school district is saying is that your child ranks in the top 5% of the students at that grade or in that subject area. Many gifted students read at the sixth grade level while in the fourth grade. Some students read even higher as gifted children. Being gifted does not mean being an elitist. On the contrary, being gifted means a social responsibility to attain your best and use your ability toward the betterment of society. It also does not mean that as a gifted student your child is responsible for educating the rest of his or her class. Many parents of normal children argue against gifted programs since your child is pulled out and their child no longer has your child's intellectual stimulation. That type of

thinking is not appropriate in a democracy. Thomas Jefferson said it best when he stated, "There is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals." That is what gifted education is all about--assisting high ability children to succeed at their level of achievement, not at a below average level for their ability. This is the goal of gifted education.

"So what! My child has these abilities and the school recognized them. Now what can I do at home?" The first and foremost rule of being a gifted parent of a gifted child is to give them your time. The Beatles said it well in their song "Can't Buy Me Love." Gifted children need your parental time. That might be on one full night a week, weekends, or at least at dinner. Much of the new research done on working mothers and their children has shown that quality time is far better than a large block of time with little substance. Later on I'll discuss types of quality time experiences to give to your gifted child.

Gifted children are children first and gifted second. Since they are children, there are a number of parental assists which should be concentrated on. Many gifted students never learn time management. Unfortunately, it is too late for them to learn it in college. Teaching your child that he or she must budget time is an important first lesson. An excellent book on the subject is Alan Larkein's "How to Get Control of Your Time." This lesson is an on-going project for the parent. An adjunct to this lesson is decision making. When a child is learning to manage her time, she also must make decisions as to how to spend that time. Your guidance into wise decision making is crucial. Watching TV all the time is not a wise decision. Watching selected programming for its educational or intellecual stimulation is a wise decision. Learning to distinguish between worthwhile and worthless programming can be an important lesson in decision making. One of the problems you might encounter is that many gifted children have such phenomenal verbal abilities, they learn to "con" you, as a parent, into a poor decision, rather than looking at options, reasons, and justifications

for a decision. Appropriate behavior for a gifted child with limits and well defined consequences must be established. Verbal abilities should not fool the parent into laxity. This child is a child first and gifted second. This means that Jimmy will fight with his brother or sister just as readily as sitting with books for hours discovering little known facts about dinosaurs at age three.

Tied to the issue of behavior is responsibility. Gifted students need to learn the routine tasks of living. Emptying and taking out the garbage as a family responsibility is a responsibility of the gifted and non-gifted alike. Mundane matters like neatness and grooming must be taught, as well as social skills. The stereotype of the absent-minded professor should not be the gifted child of tomorrow. Academic achievement should not be allowed to isolate the child from the accepted norms of our society.

Because many gifted children have multiple gifts, a frequent consequence is fragmented intellectual development. They start a project on dinosaurs, drop it in the middle of it, and begin an insect collection, only to become bored and start swimming lessons to learn about the buoyancy of objects. This interest rebounding does not allow for solid intellectual learning. Teaching the child that when you start a project you must concentrate your energy, abilities, and time until it is completed is a difficult lesson for the gifted child. The result of not teaching this lesson is somewhat like an exploded hand grenade. The child has fragments of knowledge, but no depth or breadth on any subject.

While I have been concentrating on structuring your gifted child in the last couple of pages, do not get the impression that all of a gifted child's time should be organized into neat little component blocks. Many gifted students need time to just "think." In 1926, Dr. Wallas developed a model to describe creative thinking. One of the four steps is called incubation. This is commonly known as daydreaming, staring into space, or at the walls.

All creatively gifted students go through this step prior to their most creative production. Parents should understand that this type of behavior is natural in gifted students, and while some might need prodding into actually producing something from their creative experience, most gifted students will not "waste" time in this incubation stage.

Parents are Role Models

Whether we admit it or not, we are role models for our gifted children. Like anything else, we too must work at being gifted parents of gifted children. Two crucial areas in which parents should be excellent role models are risk taking and leisure time.

We are involved in risk taking constantly in our daily lives. Our goal should be to provide enough psychological freedom and safety to all our children to take chances and make mistakes. If we say that "I can't do that" all the time, how can we expect our gifted child to try new things? If we generate excitement for trying out new experiences and new ideas, our children will not fear a break in routine.

The parent who allows their child to explain away poor math grades while saying, "Don't worry, I was never good in math," is dooming their gifted child to math mediocrity. Only through taking the risk of learning new knowledge can we progress intellectually. The Renaissance and Dark Ages historically proved this point. An adjunct to this risk taking is the concept "It's O.K. to fail." Unfortunately, in our society we cherish winners and hate losers. Education tends to be a win/lose situation for many children. With some gifted children, an A is winning, but a B is losing. One of the hardest choices for a high school gifted student is taking a course which they might get a B in, not because they need the course, but just because they like the subject. Teaching the gifted students that it's O.K. to not succeed the first time is very difficult. Biographies of sports figures and inventors

provide vivid examples of famous men and women who failed before they succeeded. Helping your child to understand that failing and succeeding both will happen to them is an important lesson.

Here is another example. I am an average gardener, but by steady hard work, I might become a great one. By showing my child that daddy's garden does not always work out, but that he does keep trying when plants die (failure), I am teaching my daughter an important lesson in perseverance and failure. If Thomas Edison had given up after his first failed invention, would you be reading this by electric or gas lighting? Failure and success are two important lessons, both of which need to be learned by the gifted student. Hand in hand with this lesson is the lesson of Great Expectations (not the Dickens classic). Many gifted children are unable to set realistic goals and therefore doom themselves to failure or even a lack of success. Here again, parents play an important role. The child who wants to do a five page report on the Civil War will soon become very frustrated at his or her ability to cover the civil war in five pages. Assisting that child in narrowing the topic to a far more managable topic within the broad topic of the Civil War should be the goal of you, the parent. Setting realistic, but high, goals should be a concern of the gifted parent. Assisting your child to set up situations with some success rather than situations doomed to failure through no fault of their own will assist them in building a positive self-image.

Turning now to the parent role model in leisure time, the phrase "Do as I say, not as I do," becomes very evident. One of the most common parental concerns in America is the amount of time children waste watching TV. Yet studies have proven that parents in these same homes were setting the very standards they criticized. Take out a sheet of paper and divide it in half lengthwise. On the right half of the paper, list all of the things you wish your children would do with their leisure time. On the left half of the paper, list all of the things you do with your leisure time. Compare and

contrast the two. If the lists are close, don't worry about your role modeling. If the lists are far apart, you may want to start role modeling more closely the behavior you desire for your children.

The Question: Why?

Like Don Quixote, the gifted go out every day on a quest. This quest is for the answer to the question, "Why?" It may be as simple as, "Why is the sky blue?" Or it may be a far more complex philosophical question which the average adult very rarely considers. While this may not seem to be a problem on the surface, the gifted parent will tell you that the question "Why?" is by far the most dreaded thought in the household. The problem is that many times as a parent you don't have the time or the energy to explain why or to assist your child in discovering the answer to the question. Unfortunately, many parents use the phrase, "Look it up yourself." While some children may have the skills to accomplish this, many do not. This only leads to frustration in the child, and an attitude that questioning is bad. Yet all of humanity's knowledge can be traced back to someone at some time asking the crucial question "Why?" Discovery and learning come from questioning one's own environment. Perhaps the best strategy is to teach your child that questioning is appropriate at certain times and not at others. Save questions either on a tape recorder or by writing them down. When Mom or Dad has the time to answer the questions, or to assist the child in finding the answer, they will. In a sense this arrangement is like a contract. You keep track of your questions, Amelia, and I will guarantee that I will answer them as soon as I am able. This type of arrangement promotes intellectual thought in the child while keeping your sanity.

Stimulate Your Gifted Child

This statement, of course, does not mean with an electric shock. Perhaps the finest compliment a school official can make to a parent is, "You're over-

stimulating your child at home." If you have been told that, rejoice in the fact that you have provided the stimulus and rich environment so crucial to a gifted student's development. Don't feel guilty.

How do you create a stimulating environment? The first step has to be as a role model. Share your interests and hobbies with your children. Let them understand the pleasure your abilities give you in your leisure time.

Promote reading. A technique to borrow from school is the use of U.S.S.R. (Uninterrupted Silent Sustained Reading). Whether it's an hour a week or an hour a day, read quietly at the same time (role model) your children read. Read to your child. The first week home from the hospital is not too soon. Reading research proves that children who were read to read more.

This next one is the hardest, Mom and Dad! Tolerate an untidy work area or room. Gifted children love to create. Unfortunately, they are not necessarily the neatest people around.

Take your child on trips to places of mutual interest. Also, take them to new places which might develop into a new interest. Encourage your child to write and verbalize creative stories. Intentionally look for specific things to praise in the child's work. General praise means nothing to the gifted child. Your specific praise does. Specific praise acknowledges specific accomplishments by your gifted student.

Create an environment in which the child has the potential to find out how "things" work. Of course, that means keeping junk around the house so that Don or Emily can take it apart or discover how it works. It also means setting up supervised experiments so that the question "Why?" may be answered.

Teach your child research skills. Once one can read, the key to unlocking knowledge is finding it. Francis Bacon said in 1660, "Knowledge is Power." Give your child the power to find knowledge. Creating games at the local library to find materials on strange facts can be used to teach your child these skills. Besides, this will enable your child to answer their own "Why?" questions by themselves.

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Parenting a gifted child is one of the greatest joys for a parent. We hope this pamphlet will enable you to assist your child to his or her fullest potential.